

**Statement by Lord George Robertson,  
Commission for Global Road Safety Chairman**

**First Global Ministerial Conference on Road Safety**

**Terrorism on the Roads**

As a former NATO secretary-general, I am familiar with the cold calculus of potential body counts applied in assessing threats to national security. But I'm still taken aback by our collective failure to face up to one of the gravest and most preventable security risks facing people across the world — the risk of death and disability on the world's roads.

This year 1.3 million people will die on the world's roads. About 40 times this number will be seriously injured. The vast majority of these deaths and injuries — 90 percent of the total — will occur in developing countries. In most of the world's poorest countries "death by traffic" is a bigger killer than major diseases. Road injuries kill more children aged 5 to 14 in poor countries than malaria or AIDS. And they are the single biggest killer of 15- to 29-year-olds. The threats associated with roads massively outweigh those posed by terrorism. Each day, road accidents cause a loss of life equivalent to 10 jumbo jet crashes.

In Russia, 33,308 people died in road accidents in 2007, or more than 91 per day, according to the World Health Organization's "Global Status Report on Road Safety." In addition, 292,206 were injured. Thus, the death rate on Russia's roads was more than 25 fatalities per 100,000, about double the U.S. rate of 13.9 and five times higher than in Britain, which has 5.4 and one of the best safety records in Europe. The WHO report also found that an extremely high percentage of victims on the roads — 36 percent — were pedestrians.

Had someone shown me the body count numbers when I was at NATO, I would have assumed that I was looking at the impact of a high-intensity civil conflict. I might have anticipated campaigns for humanitarian intervention. Yet for the most part, governments and aid agencies turn a blind eye.

It is easy to understand why road safety does not make headlines. With the international agenda dominated by the global challenges of climate change and recovery from the financial crisis, roads appear of peripheral concern — a subject for a convention of civil engineers maybe, not a world summit. That is precisely the thinking that has brought us to where we are now.

On Thursday, governments from around the world will gather in Moscow for the first-ever global ministerial conference on road safety. They have an opportunity to tackle head-on a humanitarian crisis that is destroying lives on a vast scale,

undermining progress in poverty reduction, crippling health systems and holding back economic growth. For millions of vulnerable children, the outcome of the Moscow summit is — quite literally — a matter of life or death.

The future looks bleak. While road deaths are falling in rich countries, they are spiraling in the developing world. Current projections point to fatalities doubling by 2030, with an estimated 2.4 million losing their lives.

There is something deeply disturbing about the international response to road traffic injuries. When lives are threatened by the H1NI flu pandemic, governments issue crisis prevention policies — and rightly so. Yet an epidemic that sends a quarter of a million young people to an early grave each year barely registers on the radar screen of world leaders.

Why the neglect? One of the main fallacies is that road injuries are the collateral damage of development itself — an inevitable consequence of investment in transport infrastructure and the growing demand for vehicles.

This type of thoughtless fatalism costs lives. There are few unknowns with road injuries. The causes and the simple preventative cures are well known. Tens of thousands of children die each year because major highways are routed between their homes, often in informal slums, and schools. Try to imagine sending your 7-year-old off on a daily journey that involves negotiating a six-lane highway. The solution: build protected overpasses and regulate road design to avoid human settlements.

The major killers are easy to identify. Roads that don't separate pedestrians from vehicles, failure to enforce laws on speeding and drunk driving, and the wearing of seat belts and helmets are recurrent themes. Tried and tested interventions demonstrate what is possible. Rwanda for example, has been more successful than most of its neighbors in tackling the road traffic crisis through stricter enforcement of vehicle standards and speed limits.

Road crashes typically cost developing countries from 1 percent to 3 percent of gross domestic product each year, undermining national prosperity and job creation. The question that finance ministers should ask is not whether road safety is affordable, but whether they can afford not to act.

The Moscow summit could chart a new course by pressing the United Nations to adopt a Decade of Action for Road Safety aiming to halve the projected increase in the forecast level of road fatalities by 2020. The goal could save 5 million lives and prevent 50 million serious injuries.

International development agencies like the World Bank should ensure that road safety assessments become a standard for future funding decisions. More developing country governments should draw up national plans for cutting road

deaths supported by a \$300 million international action plan, as proposed by the Make Roads Safe campaign.

Above all, the Moscow summit provides an opportunity to rethink the links between transport policy and development. We need to reject the business model that measures a nation's economic progress in terms of kilometers of roads while turning a blind eye to avoidable human suffering. And we need to put road safety at the heart of the international development agenda.

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